**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Chanuka II: Other Observances

What other observances of Chanuka are special to women? Are women obligated to recite Hallel on Chanuka?

Using the Candles

In contrast to the Shabbat candles, which were originally meant primarily to ensure that the household would be lit up on Shabbat night,[[1]](#footnote-1) the Chanuka candle's role is purely ritual, and not functional. Benefiting from the Chanuka candles, as in using their light to do work, would make it difficult for others to recognize that the Chanuka lights are there to commemorate and publicize a miracle.

Rashi *Shabbat* 21b

It is prohibited to make use of its light. In order that it be recognizable that it is a mitzva candle…

Additionally, performing a mundane task like counting money by the light of the candles would show disrespect to the candle as a mitzva article. As we sing in *ha-nerot halallu*, the candles might even be said to have sanctity reminiscent of the Menora in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.[[2]](#footnote-2) We also place an extra candle – the *shamash* – next to the other candles, so that if we do come to candle-light, we can assume we used its light and not the mitzva candles'.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Shulchan Aruch summarizes these points:

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 673:1

For it is prohibited to use the Chanuka candle, whether on Shabbat or a weekday, even to check coins or to count them by its light is prohibited, even a sacred use, like learning by its light, is prohibited. There are those who permit using them for sacred purpose. Our practice is to kindle an additional candle, so that, if he uses its light it, [the usage] will be through the extra light which was lit last. And he should place it a little distance away from the other mitzva candles.

If the prohibition of using the Chanuka candles derives from recognition of and respect for the mitzva, then it can be waived if the candles remain lit after the mitzva has been fulfilled. Shulchan Aruch specifies that it is permissible to make use of the candles after fulfilling the mitzva, from half an hour after lighting them.

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 672:2

…About a half hour, for during that time people come and go, and the publicizing of the miracle is accomplished. Therefore…one can use its light after this time.

# Work on Chanuka

According to the Talmud, our sages enacted Chanuka as "*yamim tovim*," festive days.[[4]](#footnote-4) Rashi specifies that we should not take the term "*yom tov*" to mean that labor is prohibited on Chanuka:

Rashi *Shabbat* 21b

"They [the sages] made them [the days of Chanuka] *yamim tovim* [festive days] through giving praise and thanks." Not that they would be prohibited in performing labor…

Even so, a custom developed in medieval Rhineland not to perform labor on Chanuka when the candles were lit, or on the first and last day:

Maharil Minhagim Chanuka

Gloss: It is a received tradition in our hands that a person should not perform labor when the candles are lit on Chanuka. There are those who say that also on the first and last days [of Chanuka], the custom of our deceased Rabbis was to prohibit labor.

It sounds as though this custom was an attempt to treat Chanuka as more of a *yom tov*. Although Maharil suggests that this custom was kept by all community members, it was retained and became widespread specifically among women.

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 670

…The eight days of Chanuka, in eulogizing and fasting are prohibited, but performing labor is permissible. Women have the custom not to perform labor as long as the candles are lit, and there are those who say not to be lenient with them [to allow performing labor].

Why did the narrower custom of refraining from labor when the candles are lit gain traction among women? We find two main explanations for it in classic texts:

**I. Not using the candles** We've seen that the Chanuka candles are not for use. A woman, who traditionally would do housework at night by candlelight, is liable to find herself inadvertently using them (even though the *shamash* is meant as a safeguard against this). Beit Yosef explains that by refraining from labor when the candles are lit, a woman makes it clear to her household that no one can use them.

*Beit Yosef* OC 670

Their rationale is that it should serve as a reminder that it is prohibited to use their [the Chanuka candles'] light:

On this understanding of the custom, it should be limited to the first half hour after lighting, since afterwards, as we saw above, the candles may be used.

*Mishna Berura* OC 670:1

"As long as the candles are lit"- In his home, in order to recognize that it is prohibited to use the light, and this is about a half hour.

We would assume, then, that a woman should also refrain from cooking for the half hour after lighting. This is customary in Yerushalayim, but otherwise not common practice.

**II. Recognizing the Miracle** Levush writes that this is akin to the prohibition of performing labor on *Yom Tov*, in order that we really take time to recognize the miracle:

*Levush* OC 6701

In order that they not distract their minds from remembering the miracle, they make at least that hour like a *Yom Tov*.

On this view, a woman should feel free to cook or perform other labors permissible on *Yom Tov*.

Neither rationale we've seen for this custom would seem to be restricted to women. Magen Avraham explains that women take special care to observe it because of women's role in bringing about the miracle:[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Magen Avraham* 670:1

Specifically women [refrain from labor] because the miracle came about through them.

This is reminiscent of women's connection to Rosh Chodesh,[[6]](#footnote-6) and fits in with a series of women’s traditions to refrain from performing housework of the sort prohibited on *chol ha-mo'ed* as a way of recognizing a special day. Current custom is to refrain from labor for the first half hour after the candles are lit. For these purposes, labor is typically defined as it is on *Chol Ha-mo'ed*, which does allow for cooking.

Festive Meals

Another Yom Tov practice partially adopted on Chanuka is the festive meal. Rema teaches that having a festive meal on Chanuka at which we publicize the miracle is praiseworthy.

Rema OC 670:2

We are accustomed to recite songs of praise at the festive meals that we multiply [on Chanuka], and then they become mitzva meals. There are those who say one should eat cheese on Chanuka because the miracle was performed with the milk that Yehudit fed to the enemy.

Rema adds that we should eat dairy products in commemoration of the Yehudit story. Bach takes this a step further, suggesting that women have extra reason to eat festive meals on Chanuka, because of women's role in the miracle.

Bach even suggests that, for women, there is an extra value in rejoicing at a festive Chanuka meal, also as a nod to Yehudit:

Bach OC 670

They are accustomed to multiply meals [on Chanuka], especially the women, for the miracle was performed by a woman.

Chag Ha-banot

The best example of a community following this practice might be the North African *id el-benaat*, "holiday of the girls," on Rosh Chodesh Tevet. Israeli scholar Dr. Yael Levine describes some of the ways it was celebrated, and urges us to consider embracing it in our day:[[7]](#footnote-7)

Dr. Yael Levine, 'Rosh Chodesh Tevet: Rosh Chodesh of the Girls'

After lighting the seventh candle of Chanuka, the girls and women would gather for a special celebration. They would eat dairy foods, drink wine, and dance…In Tunisia the housewife would bake honey cakes and confections in honor of this day. They even had the custom of sending *mishloach manot* and giving gifts to the girls. In every home they would make a festive meal in memory of Yehudit's heroic act. In Libya the young women would visit each other on the day of Rosh Chodesh Tevet and make festive parties…In Tunisia and Libya it was known that the women had the practice of not performing labor on Rosh Chodesh Tevet…It seems that marking “Rosh Chodesh of the Girls,” on the assumption that it was founded in memory of Yehudit's heroic act, is worth adopting in our day and renewing among all Jewish communities. This is a beautiful custom that gives validity to the act of a heroic feminine personality. Granted, it seems that one should breathe new life into it and find suitable ways to grant it a fitting Torah character and to imbue it with spiritual content, especially in light of the increase in women’s Torah study in our time.

# Hallel on Chanuka

A last mitzva of Chanuka of particular interest to women is the recitation of *Hallel*. Our sages "established them [the days of Chanuka] for *hallel* [giving praise] and thanks. On Chanuka, we recite a full *Hallel* each day:

*Arachin* 10a-10b

Rabi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon son of Yehotzadak: There are eighteen days on which an individual recites full *Hallel*: The eight days of Sukkot, the eight days of Chanuka….But Chanuka…[we recite a full *Hallel*] because of the miracle.

In other words, the recitation of *Hallel* on Chanuka serves to publicize the miracle.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Ordinarily, women are exempt from reciting *Hallel* because it is a positive time-bound commandment. This means, for example, that a man who hears *Hallel* from a woman cannot satisfy his mitzva obligation by simply listening, and needs to repeat what she says word for word:

Mishna *Sukka* 3:10

One for whom a bondsman or a woman or a minor reads [*Hallel*] repeats after them what they say.

Tosafot write on this Mishna that women are nevertheless obligated in reciting *Hallel* on seder night, because of *af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes*:

Tosafot *Sukka* 38a s.v. *Mi she-haya*

This indicates that a woman is exempt from *Hallel* of Sukkot and so, too, of Shavuot. The reason is because it is a [positive] time-bound commandment. Although regarding *Hallel* on seder night, it is indicated in Chapter 10 of *Pesachim* that women are obligated in the four cups, and they only enacted the cups in order to recite *Hallel* and the *haggada* over them. *Hallel* on Pesach is different, because it comes because of the miracle and *af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes*. But here, [Sukkot] it is not recited over the miracle.

Based on this ruling, it would seem that women should also be obligated in reciting *Hallel* on Chanuka, because that *Hallel* is also recited because of a miracle and the principle of *af hen* applies to the miracles of Chanuka.

Rambam, however, rules in accordance with the Mishna that a woman cannot discharge a man's obligation in *Hallel*, without exception.

Rambam, Laws of Megilla and Chanuka 3:6, 14

And not only the *Hallel* on Chanuka is rabbinic but reciting *Hallel* is always rabbinic on every day on which we recite the full *Hallel*…If the person calling out the *Hallel* is a minor or bondsman or woman, [a man] repeats after them what they say word for word, for the entire *Hallel*.

Rambam makes no exception for *Hallel* on Chanuka even though he recognizes that women are obligated in candle-lighting because of *af hen*. Why should this be the case?

Rav Ovadya Yosef suggests an explanation:[[9]](#footnote-9)

*Yechaveh Da'at* I 78

…Thus our sages did not obligate women in reciting it on Chanuka, in order to keep their law of saying *Hallel* consistent for women, For just as they are exempt from saying *Hallel* on every holiday, so, too, are they exempt from saying it on Chanuka. For whatever the sages enacted, they enacted on the model of Torah law (*Pesachim* 116b). And only in an exceptional way did our sages obligate women in *Hallel* on Pesach night, because of mitzva of the four cups…

Rambam considers the mitzva of *Hallel* to be unified. Even though *Hallel* on Chanuka has a special relationship to the miracle, it is not a unique mitzva. Once it has been enacted as an annual recitation, we do not differentiate halachically between *Hallel* of Chanuka and *Hallel* recited on other festive days, so women's general exemption from *Hallel* remains in place.

Sedei Chemed suggests that women should only be obligated in reciting a single chapter of *Hallel* or praise, a position which was not widely embraced.[[10]](#footnote-10) Other halachic authorities, including Rav Rephael of Volozhin, disagree, and write that women are obligated to recite *Hallel* on Chanuka:[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Torat Refa’el* 75

And so on Chanuka [women] are also obligated, because it is for the reason of the miracle.

More recent halachic authorities remain split on this issue. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach wrote that women are exempt,[[12]](#footnote-12) and Rav Ovadya Yosef follows Rambam. But Rav Shmuel Ha-levi Wosner wrote that women should be considered obligated to recite *Hallel* on Chanuka.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In Practice

As we've seen, whether women are obligated in reciting *Hallel* on Chanuka is a matter of debate. For this reason, a woman should make an effort to recite it, in order to comply with all opinions, but if necessary may rely on the opinion that women are exempt. Women who do not usually recite a *beracha* on voluntary mitzva observance should not recite one here. Women who do recite *berachot* on voluntary mitzva performance may recite a *beracha* here, whether or not *Hallel* is in fact an obligation. Reciting *Hallel* on Chanuka is an additional opportunity to reflect on the Chanuka miracle and women's role within it.

1. See our discussion in Three Mitzvot I. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Talmud raises both possibilities that the prohibition connects to sanctity or to disrespecting the mitzva.

*Shabbat* 22a

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav Assi: It is prohibited to count money opposite a Chanuka candle. When I said this before Shemuel, he said to me: Does a candle have sanctity? Rav Yosef attacked his viewpoint… [The prohibition of use] is so that he should not feel contempt for *mitzvot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Shabbat 21b

Rava said: One needs another candle to make use of its light. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shabbat 21b

They [the sages] established them [the eight days of Chanuka] and made them *yamim tovim* [festive days] through giving praise and thanks. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Magen Avraham also writes that women should refrain from labor for longer, perhaps as long as the synagogue candles are lit:

Magen Avraham 670:1

It is written in *Me’il Tzedaka* that this means for the entire time that the candles in the synagogue are lit, which is until about midnight. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Taz OC 670:2

It seems to me that one can compare it to Rosh Chodesh (beginning of Siman 417), when it is halachically permissible to perform labor, and even so, since the women have this custom not to perform labor, it is a good custom and it is a reward for them for not giving their nose-rings for the [Golden] Calf … This is also the case with Chanuka, because the miracle came about through the women, it is good that they are accustomed not to perform labor. But this custom certainly does not apply to men. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Available here: [https://www.kipa.co.il/%D7%99%D7%94%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/%d7%a8%d7%97-%d7%98%d7%91%d7%aa-%d7%a8%d7%90%d7%a9-%d7%97%d7%95%d7%93%d7%a9-%d7%94%d7%91%d7%a0%d7%95%d7%aa/](https://www.kipa.co.il/%D7%99%D7%94%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/%D7%A8%D7%97-%D7%98%D7%91%D7%AA-%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%A9-%D7%97%D7%95%D7%93%D7%A9-%D7%94%D7%91%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Berachot* 14a describes *Hallel* as “publicizing the miracle.” Rav Ovadya Yosef explains this idea further, see footnote 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. He also suggests a reason for why Rambam wouldn't consider *Hallel* on Chanuka an exception:

*Yechaveh Da'at* I 78

One can explain the opinion of Rambam, and distinguish between saying *Hallel* on Chanuka, in which women are not at all obligated, and lighting Chanuka candles, where women too are obligated, for the reason that *af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes*. Because the essence of the mitzva of lighting candles on Chanuka is in order to publicize the miracle to the masses, to the passersby, and to the members of the household, who see the lit Chanuka candles and thus remember the miracles of God and His wonders…Therefore, also women who were part of that miracle are obligated to publicize the miracle. But saying *Hallel*, even though it too is said for the sake of publicizing the miracle (as is explained in *Berachot* 14a), but this is only between him and his Creator. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sedei Chemed 9 Chanuka 9:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=1490&pgnum=269>

See also here:

Hitorerut Teshuva 51

Since [women] are obligated in the Chanuka candle, they are obligated in Hallel

Available here:

<https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=1769&pgnum=62> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach suggests that *Hallel* on Chanuka is like *Hallel* of the festivals, and no longer closely tied to the Chanuka miracle, which it does not even mention:

Responsa Minchat Shlomo Tinyana 58

…Just as women are exempt from *Hallel* of Sukkot and Shavuot, so, too, of Chanuka, since this is just time-bound. I.e., [the sages] made this time a day on which we are obligated to recite *Hallel*…Since the lighting is gratitude for the salvation, our sages chose to obligate women in this act of gratitude, since it recalls the miracle of Chanuka more than saying Hallel, in which the matter of Chanuka is not mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Responsa *Shevet Ha-Levi* I:205

If women are obligated [in *Hallel*] as in lighting…In my humble opinion there is room to obligate them in accordance with the words of the Tosafot. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)